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Hope vs. gangs

By KAREN L. HORNFECK
Special to the News & Record

Community groups are fighting a persistent gang problem with an unusual weapon — hope.

Organizers of the still-evolving Hope Project want to offer youth choices that lead them away from gang-related violence and intimidation.

Although the exact numbers are hard to pin down, a recent Governor's Crime Commission report indicates that there are more than 550 gangs with nearly 15,000 members scattered across North Carolina.

Darryl Kosciak started to see signs of gang activity among Greensboro's youth a few years ago. He wanted to do something, but figuring out where to start was hard.

"I knew nothing about gangs and even less about what to do about them," explains Kosciak, coordinator of Youth First, a program for at-risk youth sponsored by the Greensboro Parks & Recreation Department.

In spring 2005, Kosciak and representatives from the Greensboro Police Department got together and started discussing the growing gang problem in the community.

"We went out and talked to around 20 agencies in the city to get ideas," Kosciak says. They found many organizations providing good services, but the services needed to be organized to address the complex issues that allowed gangs to grow in communities. "We found that everyone brought something different to the table, and it was all about creating access and opportunity," Kosciak says.

After looking at successful programs around the nation, Guilford County organizations came together to start the Hope Project. Community partners include Greensboro Parks & Recreation, Guilford Child Development and Greensboro JobLink. In researching other successful initiatives, Kosciak found that "we needed to meet these kids where they are and to build up trust with them."

Grants from the Weaver Foundation, the Joseph M. Bryan Foundation and the Greensboro Grasshoppers have allowed the Hope Project to hire three outreach workers who focus on doing just that.

The program offers a hotline for youth who are involved in gang activity and are seeking a way out. Other initiatives are in the planning stages. Kosciak is quick to point out that solving the gang problem isn't easy and that the Hope Project isn't a quick fix, but rather a communitywide collaboration designed to offer youth a path free of gang-related violence and intimidation.

"This isn't a canned program where we come in and fix broken kids," Kosciak says. "These kids aren't broken; they are just looking for the same things other kids are looking for."

Hope Project members are determined to help area youth find exactly what they need — safety, caring adults, good role models and hope for a better future.



NANCY SIDELINGER/Special Sections Photographer

The 2008 Youth First Teen Summit was held Oct. 27, 2008, at the Greensboro Coliseum. "Anytown" youth leaders performed skits and held discussions about real situations encountered in school. Youth First organizers hope the event will encourage students to become involved in the community.

Initiatives put youth first

By KAREN L. HORNFECK
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Finding innovative ways to reach the community's youth isn't something new for the Greensboro Parks & Recreation Department.

In fact, the agency describes its Greensboro Youth Council as the first of its kind in the nation when it was started in 1962, and the GYC has since been a model for other communities across the U.S. The council is still making an impact in the city 46 years later.

With an executive board made up entirely of teenagers from area high schools, students active in the GYC participate in what is arguably a working lab for the business world.

"My board is quite young, but they still do the same thing adult boards do," says Jenny Caviness, GYC director.

Participation in GYC offers area high school students the opportunity to build résumés and valuable work experience. They develop marketable skills by organizing 10 to 12 special events a year, including the GYC Carnival, the largest youth-run event in the state, and Ghoulish, a Halloween festival that attracts an average of 4,000 people each year. Students also attend workshops on topics like business letter writing and etiquette, public speaking, goal-setting and finance.

The council has deep roots. Caviness participated in GYC activities when she was in high school and says that many past and current community leaders did as well, including

City Councilman Mike Barber.

One of the GYC's newest initiatives is Camille's Magic Closet. Two years ago, the GYC board decided to offer donated prom dresses to students unable to afford something to wear to their high school's prom. The first year, 70 students took advantage of Camille's Closet. This year, over 100 students found dresses. The GYC also operates the annual Santa's Workshop, which helps around 400 low-income residents provide Christmas gifts for their families.

With over 500 students participating in GYC activities this year, Caviness proudly points out that "this is the largest number we've had in our database yet." Caviness is excited that today's busy students continue to donate time and talent to making their hometown a better place. "These teenagers are amazing kids; working here just gives you hope for the future," she says.

One of Parks & Recreation's newest youth-oriented programs is Youth First, located at the Folk Teen Center at 3910 Clifton Road. Started in 1996, Youth First partners with other similarly focused area organizations to create innovative programs to help at-risk youth.

Coordinator Darryl Kosciak is quick to point out "that by our definition, all teenagers are at risk."

John Hughes, manager of youth and community programs for Parks & Recreation, agrees. "Once teens leave their home environment, they are at-risk, whether it's due to peer pressure or just

being out of a familiar environment."

Youth First programs encourage students to stay on a positive course with a variety of programs, including summer camps, sports leagues and leadership workshops.

One of the most successful initiatives has been the Student of the Month awards program for middle and high school students. Award recipients might not be the highest achievers in their class, but they are nominated by teachers, counselors or others for improving under difficult circumstances, from personal issues to physical barriers.

"Most of these kids' stories are just incredible," Kosciak says, "and they are examples to other students."

At the end of the year, a Student of the Year is chosen and awarded a \$1,000 savings bond. "The monetary award is really just a token," Kosciak says. "It's the life changes that will pay off a thousandfold."

Youth First also hosts a Teen Summit each fall. Students picked a multicultural theme for the 2008 event, and more than 200 middle and high students gave up a day off to attend the free, full-day workshop. Youth organizations across the county came in to make presentations, and Mayor Yvonne Johnson spoke.

Youth First organizers hope the event will encourage students to become involved in the community. "Every year, one of our key points is getting students involved," Kosciak says. "Their voices can make a difference."